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OP-ED | ENVIRONMENT & HEALTH

COVID Hasn't Disappeared — But Empathy, Care and Solidarity Have

Governments worldwide are abandoning people to a debilitating disease with one simple trick: saying it no longer exists.

By Tithi Bhattacharya, TRUTHOUT
July 6, 2023

NAMING THE LOST
NOMBRANDO A LOS FALLECIDOS
THE MANY LOSSES OF COVID-19
MISSING THEM
Remembering the New Yorkers We've Lost to COVID-19
THE CITY
KIDS WHO LOST PARENT TO COVID, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A person walks by tributes in art made by 20 community groups to those impacted by COVID-19, done in collaboration between Naming the Lost Memorials, City Lore and Green-Wood Cemetery, at Green-Wood Cemetery on May 8, 2023, in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

SPENCER PLATT / GETTY IMAGES

PART OF THE SERIES

Despair and Disparity: The Uneven Burdens of COVID-19

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Throughout 2020-2021, I wrote many pieces about COVID in an effort to highlight both the severity of the disease and the failure of capitalist governments to ensure the health and safety of their citizens, especially the most vulnerable of them, in the face of a global pandemic. I also edited a series, "Dispatches from the Frontlines of Care," where I tried to center the voices of essential workers during the pandemic. But I also have a different story to share – something different in both tenor and nature. The difference between all the other work I have done on COVID and what you will read below is the difference between a prescription and an open wound.

Spring 2021: At Least I Have…

I creep back to work, unwillingly, double masked, double vaxxed. My request to formally teach online has been denied by my university. I now have to use spongy, half-formed ideas

and strategies of my own to protect myself and my child. I have severe asthma, and my pulmonologist has recently told me that I only have 40 percent lung capacity.

First humiliation: sharing intimate medical history with a class full of freshmen, mostly 18-year-olds.

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"I have asthma… etc. etc., so I would be very grateful if you all masked in my class." Many nod sympathetically, others are indifferent. "I will supply you with masks," I say desperately. Thus begins a two-year relationship with Amazon, where at the end of each week, I buy, with my own money, a box of masks for my students. Some of my classes are large, and students often forget their masks, so each day of class I supply them with a new one. And on and on. And yet, I feel lucky — at least they are not refusing.

Let me rephrase that last sentence: I am *made to feel* lucky for

others observing minimal protections against a debilitating disease. The effect is, I feel, not unlike the way workers on unconscionably low-wage jobs are made to feel lucky ("at least you have a job").

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Denial Isn't an Effective Health Care Strategy, Say People With Long COVID

Fall 2021: Numbers and Their Banality

A new group of students. Another round of abject requests from me to them. Meanwhile, friends are getting impatient with me, as I still refuse to go into restaurants to eat or to do anything indoors that involves taking my double masks off. This fall, my child is one of a very, very small handful of students in her high school who are still masking. I am the only one doing so in my department. I have not traveled anywhere since January 2020.

When someone masks around me, I am made to feel grateful. When I request that someone masks, I am made to feel unreasonable. My home state, Indiana, ranks last on a list of "safest states during COVID-19."

I read Anne Boyer's extraordinary book, *The Undying*. "The history of illness is not the history of medicine," writes Boyer, rather, "it's the history of the world — and the history of having a body could well be the history of what is done to most of us in the interest of the few."

Why does death get leached of its significance and dread when you plant a large number in front of the word?

I look at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: on September 4, 2021, a year and half into the pandemic, the CDC records weekly deaths in the U.S. to be 15,493. By the end of the year, the CDC will record in small letters, and you will have to fine-tune your search to find it: there were a total of 460,000 deaths in the U.S. during January to December 2021.

I find myself wondering: *Why does death get leached of its significance and dread when you plant a large number in front of the word?*

Spring-Summer-Fall 2022: COVID as a *Buzzfeed* Listicle

I learn a new phrase from world governments and their pet media sources: "living with COVID." *The Washington Post*

puts it best in its widely circulated headline "10 tips for co-existing with COVID (and leading a normal-ish life);" the opening line of the article reads: "Living with COVID can be easy if you take simple, regular precautions."

The pandemic is over! It is now like a *Buzzfeed* listicle!

The CDC is still reporting an average of 4,000 deaths weekly.

Let me rephrase that: Every week, 4,000 people who were mothers, fathers, children, neighbors, grandparents, colleagues, were dying. They will never again open a window, kiss, laugh at a joke.

The CDC estimates that 31 million working-age Americans have long COVID. A study, which I don't understand fully, tells me that the coronavirus has a "wide tropism" and infects human cells via the ACE2 receptor. People with long COVID are likely to have "cognition problems, affective disorders, heart and pulmonary damage," and that these symptoms "speak to each other." A Dutch survey shows increasing cognitive problems among COVID survivors, some as young as 25.

I feel a certain vertigo before the expanse of these facts. These days, I often think of the words of scientific philosopher Thomas Kuhn: What one sees "depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conception experience has taught him to see." Facts about long COVID,

In the U.S., only if you pledge to die for capitalism, do you get a chance to live.

about COVID deaths, continue to exist as stray facts; some invisible force stops those facts from coalescing into a map, a narrative. From becoming knowledge.

I go to Target (supermarket) after a long time. I hear a conversation between two young (early 20s) male (white) employees:

Employee 1: As soon as I heard of COVID, I wanted to have it.

Employee 2: Why?

Employee1: Because if you get COVID, Target gives you three weeks off *with full pay*, dude!

I am immediately reminded of an Indiana law that if a soldier earned a Purple Heart in war, they were entitled to free education in a state university. I think, *In the U.S., only if you pledge to die for capitalism, do you get a chance to live.*

Spring-Summer 2023: Living With COVID

I look at my notes from January. Threaded through the words are red lines of anxiety about COVID, the continuing humiliation of having to reveal my medical facts to teenagers and depend on their generosity. In January of the new year, the CDC records a weekly average of 3,662 deaths. I wonder: *If all these people were millionaires, then would we still say we were over the pandemic?* One night I dream of a pandemic that only kills the rich and people with mismatched eyes.

COVID has yielded the most stunningly pervasive gaslighting phenomenon in recent history.

I lose a beloved person to the war in Ukraine. I stop comparing defense budgets to money allocated for health. I begin to realize that "living with COVID" actually means ignoring COVID.

One cue, May 11 marks the end of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency.

I turn back to my notes from February. I see that I wrote:

> The institutional disregard for disabled and vulnerable lives displayed in our COVID policies means that ordinary people, in these last three years, have also been forced to

> adopt that approach. Or lose their jobs. The long-term effects of this deepening culture of casual malice will be with us for a long time, inhibiting empathy, care, and solidarity in many areas of social life.

In June, I finally get COVID. As does my daughter. Not because I did not take care, but because others did not.

My throat feels like a hundred knives are being plunged into it as I swallow. My temperature rises. Despite such morbid concreteness, COVID now is a phantom disease. It has become, thanks to capitalist institutions, a matter of personal belief and choices.

When one asks for the minimum protections, even the most sensible individuals shrug and say, "but for how long?" Those who ask, those who mask, are made to feel that we are demanding impossible things.

COVID has yielded the most stunningly pervasive gaslighting phenomenon in recent history. Willing and eager governments worldwide are abandoning citizens to a debilitating disease by one simple trick: saying it no longer exists.

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Tithi Bhattacharya is a professor of South Asian History at Purdue University. She is the author of *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial*

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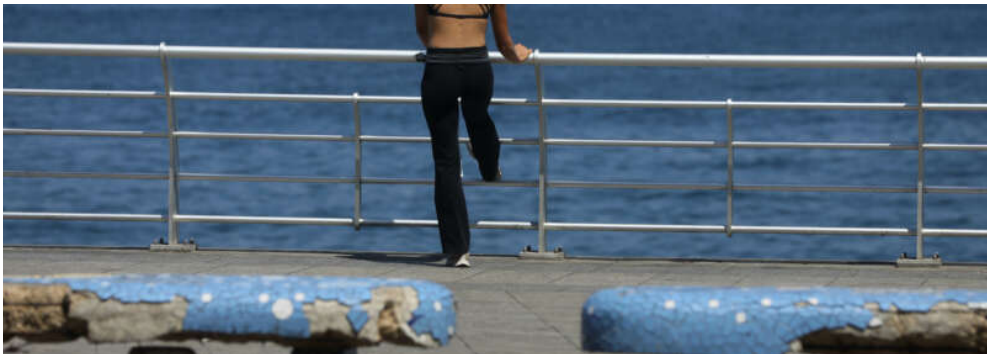

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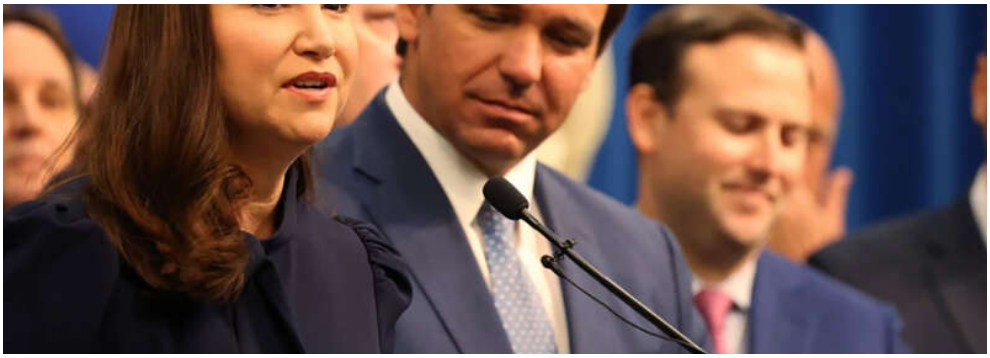

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